

Not the End

By Sinclair B. Ferguson

Hebrews 13:20-25

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OPENING PRAYER:

Gracious Father, again, our hearts are stirred to long for that day when all creatures will sing your praises. We thank you that already, there are those of this church family throughout the ages who sing the praises of our Savior, Jesus Christ, without hindrance, sin, and without end. Thank you for the privilege of gathering around your heavenly throne, to rejoice together in your goodness and loving kindness to us. To seek your grace and help in any time of need. We praise you that Jesus Christ is all sufficient for all of our needs, all of the time. We pray once more our Father, that you would come and speak to us through your Word, that we may become more conscious of your voice the the voice of man. And that we may find ourselves drawn in to love the Lord Jesus more. To desire to serve him more fully, and to be freshly assured that he will be to us all we shall ever need. So come, Lord, we look to you, as servants to the hand of their master and maid-servants to the hand of their mistress. Pray you would open your hand and feed us and direct us and hold us. And this we pray in Jesus's name. Amen. Please be seated.

SCRIPTURE READING:

Now, our scripture reading is the closing words of the letter to the Hebrews. And you'll find the passages on page 1010, in the Pew Bible, the English Standard Version we use here. And for our children who have the Children's Bible, it's on page 1504. And for any who may be visitors to our congregation today, we have been for a number of months studying together and listening to the teaching of the great letter to the Hebrews. And today we come in due course to the closing words. So let us hear God's word in Hebrews chapter 13 and verses 20 through 25.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory, forever and ever. Amen. I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings, Grace, be with you all.

SERMON:

When we began this series on Hebrews that has taken us, I suppose, about six months or so, since the beginning of the year, I didn't anticipate that this Sunday would be our last Sunday in studying it. Nor did I quite anticipate the relevance of the sermon title I gave to this passage six months ago: Not the End. But there is I think, something providentially wonderful about our coming to this passage on an occasion like this, as we come to the end of one of the ministries that has punctuated the life of this congregation, as little more than a small punctuation mark in a period now of well over 200 years. There's something even about the way in which Hebrews is laid out in the English Standard Version, with rather a large segment of blank page at the end of the text. Because something about this letter that we have found so profound, so gloriously centered on the riches of Jesus Christ, and yet it seems like a great symphony that comes to an end in a rather mundane fashion: a few greetings; an appeal for the brethren to bear with the word of exhortation; a word about Timothy; a few greetings to the leaders and to the members of the church; and, some reference to the Italians. And a very short benediction at the end. And so we're left as it were with this blank piece of paper at the bottom. And my instinct as I read these words is to say, could you not tell us what happened next? Why this blank page when we want to know: were you were able to come with Timothy? We want to know, who were these Italians? We want to know how all this worked out in the lives of these Hebrew Christians. Did they find help in this letter? We want to know what happens next. But just as for the readers, the first readers and hearers of Hebrews, so for us, what happens next, in some measure, depends on how we respond to the letter to the Hebrews.

But you'll notice, I think, something fascinating about the glorious section that precedes these apparently random comments, and is headed in the English Standard Version: Benediction. Most letters in the New Testament actually end with a benediction. It's one of the reasons why, in our church, every service ends with one of the ministers pronouncing the benediction. The blessing of God promised to us in the gospel pronounced over our lives. But the interesting thing about this benediction, you'll notice, right at the end of verse 21, is that this benediction ends with a doxology. Doxology is what we have just been singing. When we express our praise to the glory of God. Benediction is his blessing of our lives. Doxology is our praise of the Lord for who he is, and for all that he has done for us. And as I say, most New Testament letters end with the benediction. A couple of New Testament letters end with a doxology. But I think I'm right in saying there is on the one letter, in which a benediction is transformed into a doxology. Only one letter, where the blessing of God, and the response of giving glory to God are woven together, as though somehow or another, they were integrally related to one another. And I hope that we will see, as we think about these verses, that in many ways, that is a great key to our understanding of the Christian gospel, and to our living of the Christian life. That divine benediction and our responding doxology of praise and glory to God lie at the very heart of what it means to be blessed as a Christian believer.

Now these two little sections, verses 20 to 21, and then verses 22, through verse 25. Constitute two simple closing words. The first of course is an expression of the anonymous author's aspirations, his desires, his prayers, for his fellow Christians. And the closing verses, in many ways constitute his final appeal to them, as his fellow Christians.

So first of all, in verses 20 and 21 he expresses his deepest desire for their lives. Now, in our English version, rightly so, verses 20 through 21 are one sentence. If you are an author, you don't get away with that kind of thing in publishing these days. If you are one of those people who can't put periods into

your sentences and you write something for a magazine or for a newspaper, or you're writing a book that will come back to you from the editor turned into four sentences. Because we are not capable of following the train of thought that is so complex that it will take us through an eight line sentence, apparently. And this is a hugely complex sentence. Let us be honest about it. It is a hugely complex sentence. But at its heart lie these words, "May the God of peace equip you." "May the God of peace equip you."

And you notice as he breaks that open, that he is saying several things. We almost would fail to notice them -- the sentences so complex. But he's praying, first of all, that God the Father, who is the God of peace, "would equip them", notice "with everything good to do His will." Fascinating combination of language, isn't it? That he would do everything for good in our lives, that we may do His will for His glory. In a sense, this is a summary of Paul's great statement, isn't it? In Romans chapter eight, when he assures us that "God works everything together for good." The point he's making, partly is, things don't naturally work together for good because there are so many bad and evil things. Things that pain us, break our hearts, cause us anguish. The point is not everything is good. That would be to stick our heads in the sand -- ostrich like. The point is that on the grand tapestry that God is weaving, he is weaving together the darkness and the light and the varied colors together for the good of those who love Him. And He is saying, God will equip you, with everything good. You and I need to know that. That everything God does in our lives, however mysterious, however sore it may be, he will weave his gracious purposes, ultimately, for good in order that we may do his will.

You're so weak. And so the author now says it's not only that the father who equips you will do everything that's needed to do you good. It is that the Spirit who empowers you will work in you, in order to enable you to please God. Course he doesn't mention the names of the Father and the Spirit and the Son. But as we know our New Testament it's clear that whenever the New Testament speaks about God working in us, remember how Paul puts it, "work out your salvation." Not work for it, but worked it out into the whole of your lives because God himself "is at work in you to will and to do of His good pleasure." That is what the Spirit is sent into our lives to accomplish. And he tells us that the Holy Spirit will surely do this. He will work in us. And so shape our lives that our lives may become a pleasure to God. And when we ask where all the resources come for this glorious transformation of our lives, then the resources he says are to be found in Jesus Christ. God, equipping us as Father with everything good, so that we may do His will. God working in us through the Holy Spirit, so that we may do what is pleasing in His sight and the resources to enable us to live to the glory of God found in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Long since this has staggered my mind as an individual, but in one sense, it seems to take the whole activity of the divine Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit to bring me to the place where the glory of God is my chief delight. And where pleasing God becomes my greatest pleasure, too. Because the end in view, you notice, the end of verse 21, is that to him there may be glory forever and forever.

Now, my dear friends, this is why I say that uniquely in Hebrews, this weaving together of benediction and doxology, doxology and benediction, is so important, because by nature, we think these two things are contrary to each other. If I've met one person, I've met 1000 persons, who deep, deep down believes that anything that is ultimately to the glory of God, and to the pleasure of God, is going to steal from my pleasure. But you see, the point he's making here is how short sighted we are. How feeble our understanding is. We were made, as our catechism teaches us, "To glorify God and to enjoy him

forever." And that is actually the way -- really to joy. Really, to pleasure. "Solid joys, lasting treasures, none but Zion's children know."

But the fact of the matter is that this is what the non Christian fears most of all. What does the non Christian fear? The non Christian fears, like a thief, the glory of God. The idea that you would want to live for the glory of God, the unbeliever spells as the spoiling and destruction of all my pleasures, and bound by his or her addictions to pleasures that last only for a season and then bring us into bondage. Their never able to taste and see how good the Lord is.

Dear friends, you can be a real Christian believer, and there's still to be a lingering reality in your life. This is what holds you back. You look into the ocean of God's riches. And as you dip your foot into that ocean, you instinctively draw back. Lest you lose control. Lest you lose your securities. Lest you lose the plans you have for your own life.

But you see he is teaching us that the real way to blessing is with the open hand that says, "Lord, I know that this is for your glory, for your pleasure. And that only in your glory and in your pleasure, will I ever find my lasting pleasures." So that benediction and doxology join together. And he's speaking to Christians who are frail. Sometimes we've noticed he's been pretty tough with them. He said, "You lot. You've been Christians so long, you should be able to teach others. But I need to teach you the ABCs." So he's not been what we would call all mealy mouth with them. He knows they are weak, he knows they're fragile. He knows they stumble. But you notice also he has this great assurance about them. He has this settled confidence and expectation that God's blessings will be theirs. Not because of what they are, but because of who God is, as the God of shalom, the God of peace. Who has power to keep me because he had power to raise Jesus from the dead.

And we need to imploy that gospel logic. If he has the power to raise Jesus from the dead, He has the power to hold on to the weakest Christian. Remember how our fathers used to say so helpfully, the weakest Christian believer has the same strong Christ as the strongest Christian believer. That's why he has this confidence that God will hold on to them. And because this Jesus who was raised from the dead, is, he says, "the great shepherd of the sheep", he knows his sheep by name. And there's nowhere we can go, we were singing about this, to hide from him. The shepherd knows who you are. The shepherd knows where you are. The Shepherd is able to find you, and keep you. And the reason we can be sure he wants to do that, is, as he says here, that God does this, through Christ, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, who shed the blood of the eternal covenant.

May I say to you once again, how do you know that God loves ya? How do you know God loves ya? Because things are going well? Because your ambitions are being fulfilled? Because you've enough in the bank to keep you going the next three months, as the financial people tell you you ought to have because the stocks and shares are rising again. And...or because you've won or you've got the job you look for? None of those things is the reason you can know God loves you. You may be out of work in two weeks time. The stock market may crash, things may go horribly wrong. You may lose the most precious things in your life. If those are the reasons you have believed that God loves you, when they're taken from you, all you're left with is to say, "Well, do you love me?" And the author of Hebrews is saying, fix your mind and understanding on this. Your ultimate persuasion that the Lord loves you is not found in any of those minor gifts he gives to you. But in the great gift of the sacrifice of His Son. This is Hebrews version of Romans 8:32, that has been an anchor to so many of us. "If the father didn't spare his own Son, but gave him up to the cross for us all." If he's gone that distance for me, then as I look to

the cross, I can be permanently persuaded that their the Son shed his covenant blood. And if he has done that, he will stop at nothing to bring me home.

And this is his confidence. This is actually his joy. As Toplady teaches us to sing, "In a debtor to Mercy alone. My name from the palms of his hands eternity will not erase. Inscribed on his heart, it remains in marks of indelible grace. Yes, I to the end shall endure as sure as the earnest is given." And then the stunning line, "More happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven." This is his desire for their lives. And he is confident that the one who has begun a good work among them will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ.

But he's one of those New Testament pastors, isn't he? You know, I sometimes say especially to people who are so enamored of the apostle Paul, that they'll say, I really wish I'd had Paul as my minister. And I will say, you need to think about that. He was, he was never finished with his congregation until Christ was finished with them. And it's the same with this man, as he points them to the grace and glory of the gospel.

He was never finished with his congregation until Christ was finished with them. And it's the same with this man. As he points them to the grace and glory of the gospel, he also in addition to expressing his desire for their lives, issues his final appeal to their hearts in verses 22 and 25. And I've said, as you think about the profound things that are in this letter. This all seems terribly mundane, doesn't it? Bits and pieces of things. Then of course that's where the Christian life is lived. The Christian life isn't about spectacular things. It is about mundain. It's about God making people in ordinary situations, live in those ordinary situations in an extra ordinary way.

But what has struck me about these closing words, if I may speak just personally for a moment is, that in these little incidentals. he manages to weave in some of the great themes of his pastoral ministry to them. You notice, how he says, "I appeal to you brothers", "I encourage you brothers to bear with my word of exhortation." There's just little hints in what he says. Tell the truth I was delighted to find them as I was thinking about this passage, that in so many ways ground the burden of the various ministries that have been exercised in this church over the years.

First of them we'd almost not notice. It is he sees them as family. He says, "I appeal to you brothers." And there goes the ESV again, as though we didn't know it, footnote to "or brothers and sisters." Christian friends, that the language he uses is significantly, deliberately the language of family. May I say again to you that's what we here. Family of brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Family that has the same DNA of faith in Jesus Christ. And the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That in each of us who believes in Jesus Christ, Christ has given his own Holy Spirit to dwell in us. So that when we see each other we see one another differently from the way the world sees us. Just as in a family we see each other differently than the world sees us. We say that's my brother. That's my sister, my father, my mother, my grandmother, my children.

Ahh my dear freinds. That is one of the crying needs of our time. The church is awash with all kinds of things that it might do to make impact on the outside. But it can never make impact on the outisde until it is on the inside the reality of which the gospel speaks. And you know in the midst of our moaning about the disfunctions of famiy life. And all the gastly things that are happening -- and they are happening. If we would only grasps, when God makes a congregation

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And then he gives us a little hint about how he's thought about his ministry. Do you notice that? "Bear with my word of exhortation." Now, what's interesting about this word it's them it's the same Greek word that's used in a broad spectrum of ways for being a helper -- being an encouragement. When we speak about the Holy Spirit, some of our hymns still do -- some of the older translations did this. When we speak about the Holy Spirit, we sometimes speak about him as the heavenly para cleat. Because our Lord Jesus used the word and John's gospel, John speaks of Jesus talking about the Holy Spirit as the Paracletos, the one called alongside to help, to minister, to bless. And he says, this has been the goal of the 13 chapters of of this letter. I just want to help.

You know, when I do practical things, I don't always get them right. And sometimes I say, the wording on my tombstone alongside the words on the back of the tombstone out there, that at some tree in Charleston in 1762 or whenever he pledged to resist British taxation... Have you seen seen that stone out there? On the other side of mine apart from resisting British taxation by living in the United States of America -- Freedom! I think the words will be, "He was only trying to help." (Laughter) He was only trying to help.

And this is our relationship, dear ones, isn't it? Ahh, you know, we people, we have titles and gowns and things. But we ministers we're helpers. We're here to befriend. And this is -- this is his ministry. It's a beautiful description of his ministry.

So he sees them as family. He talks about his ministry. And then he reminds them, do you notice this of the church's internationality? Well where does that come? Just this casual statement? He says, "Those who come from Italy send you greetings." Out of the blue, "Those who come from Italy send you greetings." We've no idea really, the scholars want to find out, where were these recipients? And where was the writer? But wherever they were he was in contact with those who came from Italy. And he assumed that these Christians, wherever they were, almost certainly not in Italy, that these Christians had an interest in those who came from Italy. And the Italians had an interest in the gospel work among the Hebrews. What's it saying to us? It's saying that the family to which we belong spreads internationally. That's actually what world missions is all about, isn't it? It's about the family spreading internationally. And the international family joining with us in the praise, worship of God, as John Piper says, I think rightly, "that worship is the goal of world missions. And the reason for world missions is that not all are members of the family and share in the worship of God."

And do know the wonderful thing... You know, somebody said to me when they heard I was coming to Columbia: "You're going to Columbia, South Carolina?" I think this was a minister who would have gone to Chicago or New York, or LA or San Francisco. But he didn't regard Columbia, South Carolina as the center of the universe. Now. We know better. (laughter) Because we can reach the world from Columbia, South Carolina. We don't know where these Christians were or where the author was. But they were reaching the world with the gospel. So he sees them as family. Tells him about his ministry. He reminds them of the church's internationality. And he slips in something wonderful about Timothy.

Well what's so wonderful about Timothy? Well, "Our brother Timothy has been released." Now this is the man -- the new to the only man in the New Testament who was told that he needed to start drinking wine. Because he had a bad tummy. And he apparently had to use it for medicinal purposes. I think physicians still tell some people that they need to start drinking some wine for the sake of their tummy problems. Maybe, maybe his tummy rumbled in church services and almost certainly when you read the letters to Timothy, you, you get the impression he was he was not a type A personality. When he was going to the Corinthians Paul had to write and say now, make sure you put him at his ease. Make sure you put him at his ease. And then he'll do the work of the Lord. But do you see what's being said about Timothy? "Timothy has been released." Now, it's not talking about the latest blockbuster movie. It's talking about this relatively fragile Christian believer having been willing to suffer for the sake of the Lord Jesus. And he's been in prison. And almost without needing to say so, he's saying, do you see that all I aspire for you that Christ is able to do, he's done in Timothy and when Timothy comes he's going to tell you all about how the gospel actually works. The gospel is true.

And then some words ending in why. "He's written to them briefly." Sure doesn't seem like that. Briefly? This is the third longest letter in the New Testament. And when we were in chapters five and six, it shouldn't look brief. But now that he's at the end, there's so much more to say. There's so much more to do to glorify Jesus Christ. And so as he looks back, I feel this, been feeling this for a wee while now, as I look back, these past almost eight years, we've got to know each other. And now, it all seems to have been just a momentary flash. And it's, it's almost gone. It's -- it's been very brief. But you see, until eternity, wherever our eyes are focused on the Lord Jesus Christ. It all seems to be too brief. Because there's so much more to do. There's so much more to know, so much love and worship, to give to him

for all that he has done. And it all seems like life itself, to be so very brief. So he says doxology and benediction, your blessing and God's glory belong together.

Many of you I know had to mother, like my mother. My mother poured her soul into her two boys. Gave her two boys everything and more that she could. That was our benediction. But it was also her glory. And if it's like that, for an earthly mother, how much more in our relationship to our Heavenly Father, that to give him glory is to experience his benediction. And his benediction at the end of this letter is for you. Grace, be with all of you.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us your word and through your word pointing us to our Savior Jesus Christ. We pray that you would fill our hearts with fresh trust in Him and love for him. And this we pray. In His name. Amen.